

From Sign to Strategy: The Staff in Emma-Claire Fierce's BATTONS Trilogy and in the Qur'an

A strategic and analytical reading prepared for professional circulation in the publishing industry

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Abstract. This article proposes a comparative close reading of Emma-Claire Fierce's BATTONS trilogy in light of the Qur'anic staff, reading the object as a sign of revelation, discernment, passage, and strategic relation. It also situates the trilogy within the author's earliest dramatic corpus, written in 2018-2019 during the formative period of her artistic emergence in Nantes on France's Atlantic-facing west coast. The article argues that BATTONS moves from enigma to election, from attachment to authorship, and from symbolic concentration to an ethics of relation whose final question concerns what human beings build with the force they receive: bridges or walls.

Keywords. Emma-Claire Fierce; BATTONS; Qur'an; Musa; staff; symbolic object; theatre; strategic reading; discernment; link; publishing studies; Nantes; Atlantic imagination

1. Introduction

The BATTONS trilogy is built around one of the oldest and most concentrated devices in symbolic culture: a vertical object placed at the threshold between matter and meaning. Across the three plays, the staff is first looked at, then desired, then re-authored, then theorised as an instrument that can organise relation itself. Such an object calls for a reading that is at once literary, symbolic, and strategic.

This article argues that the most productive scriptural counterpart to Fierce's object is the Qur'anic staff. In the Qur'an, the staff of Musa begins as an implement of everyday use, then becomes a sign, a proof, an instrument of passage, and an emblem of entrusted authority (Qur'an 20:17-21; 26:63; 2:60). A second Qur'anic scene, involving Sulayman's staff, adds a final dimension: the staff can also expose the end of worldly power when the body it sustains collapses (Qur'an 34:14).

Placed beside this scriptural archive, BATTONS reveals a rigorous progression. The trilogy moves from enigma to election to doctrine. In the first play, the staff is looked at. In the second, it is desired, interpreted, tested, lost, and re-authored. In the third, it becomes the explicit basis for a theory of relation: a staff can be used in the service of union or separation, bridge or wall. Fierce thus turns a dramatic object into a strategic instrument of thought.

2. Context of Writing and Early Dramatic Corpus

The BATTONS trilogy belongs to Emma-Claire Fierce's first body of work in drama. According to an authorial contextual note supplied for this article, the plays were written during 2018-2019, when Fierce was twenty-eight years old and living in Nantes, France. They emerged alongside two further early dramatic works, Nouveaux Jouets and La Dose, within an intensely generative period during which she devoted her time to writing while beginning her artistic career after what she describes as an epiphanic turning point.

This biographical and geographic context matters for interpretation. Nantes occupies a western Atlantic horizon within France, and that orientation toward the ocean provides a suggestive spatial backdrop for a trilogy preoccupied with axis, passage, force, and relation. Even before Fierce's later oceanic projects, the early dramatic corpus already reveals a mind working through concentration, threshold, exposure, and movement between enclosure and opening. BATTONS may therefore be read both as an

autonomous theatrical construction and as an inaugural matrix within the author's broader artistic formation.

3. Corpus and Method

This reading combines close textual analysis and symbolic comparison. It does not claim direct equivalence between Qur'anic revelation and contemporary theatre. It proposes instead a disciplined juxtaposition between two regimes of signification that share a common object and an overlapping set of functions. The method is therefore hermeneutic rather than devotional: it attends to what the object does inside each corpus.

The primary literary corpus comprises *BATTONS I: Se bat-on pour ca?*, *BATTONS II: S'ebat-on pour ca?*, and *BATTONS III: Ses bas tombent pour ca...* (Fierce 2019a; 2019b; 2019c). The scriptural corpus comprises selected Qur'anic passages involving the staff of Musa and the staff of Sulayman (Qur'an 20:17-21; 26:63; 2:60; 34:14). The guiding question throughout is strategic: what capacities are attributed to the staff, and what do those capacities reveal about truth, relation, authority, creation, and survival?

4. The Staff in the Qur'an

The Qur'anic staff does not enter revelation as a decorative emblem. It begins in intimacy. Asked what he holds in his right hand, Musa replies that it is his staff, that he leans on it, and that he uses it in daily care (Qur'an 20:17-18). This opening matters enormously. The staff is first located within habit, bodily support, and pastoral labour. Revelation does not arrive through an exotic object. It seizes an ordinary implement and intensifies it.

From there the staff becomes a sign. In the same passage, Musa is ordered to throw it down; it becomes a serpent-like moving reality that exceeds the ordinary horizon of perception (Qur'an 20:19-21). Later, the staff parts the sea, transforming enclosure into passage (Qur'an 26:63). In another scene it strikes the rock and water emerges, turning lack into provision (Qur'an 2:60). The staff therefore performs at least four Qur'anic functions: it supports, reveals, separates, and opens.

The episode of Sulayman adds a final and sobering dimension. His staff continues to hold the body upright until its internal weakening is exposed; only then does the collapse occur (Qur'an 34:14). Here the staff is linked to sovereignty, posture, and concealed mortality. It can sustain the appearance of continuity, yet it also becomes the means through which the illusion of uninterrupted command is broken. Taken together, these passages establish the staff as an axis of delegated power: it is never the source of authority in itself, yet it makes authority visible and tests what authority can or cannot hold.

5. *BATTONS I: The Upright Enigma and the Birth of Interpretation*

BATTONS I begins with an empty stage save for an upright staff that appears to stand by itself; two characters face it, circle it, and attempt to understand it (Fierce 2019a, 10-12). The dramaturgical decision is exacting. Before plot, biography, or social setting, Fierce installs a vertical sign in a field of emptiness. Meaning therefore arrives under pressure. The staff precedes explanation, and language is forced to organise itself around a visible centre that remains semantically unstable.

The first consequence is hermeneutic conflict. Q and D do not merely look at the same object; they disclose different relationships to unreadability. D is irritated by the fact that he does not understand. Q tolerates indeterminacy for longer, turning the uncertainty into imaginative possibility. The staff thus operates as a diagnostic instrument. It reveals less about itself, at first, than about the interpretive reflexes of those who approach it.

A decisive moment occurs when Q imagines that the object might be a rain staff and then a shepherd's staff. A rain staff, she says, would announce rain; a shepherd's staff would tell sheep which way to go (Fierce 2019a, 60-61). This sequence opens the trilogy directly toward Qur'anic resonance. The staff becomes an announcer and an orienter. It communicates without necessarily speaking human language. That idea aligns closely with the Qur'anic movement from the ordinary staff to the staff as sign and guide. Fierce does not reproduce the Qur'anic narrative; she activates a homologous logic. The staff is what discloses direction.

Equally important is Q's refusal to let the staff be broken. When D suggests splitting it in two, Q intervenes violently: it is more than a simple staff, it must not be broken, touched, or reduced (Fierce 2019a, 62-63). The scene marks the passage from objecthood to invested symbolic value. The staff is no longer a neutral thing on stage. It has become a guarded axis. Later, when Q realises that her emotional fall and the staff belong to the same intuition, she exclaims, 'This staff is the evidence' (Fierce 2019a, 51-52). The staff here serves as condensation device: it absorbs affect, interpretation, and epistemic recognition at once. *BATTONS I* therefore establishes the first regime of the trilogy: the staff as enigma that generates reading, friction, and revelation of interior states.

6. *BATTONS II: Election, Scale, Disenchantment, and Authorship*

If *BATTONS I* organises a crisis of interpretation, *BATTONS II* radicalises attachment. The stage remains nearly empty, with Q intensely focused on a staff later specified as a toilet plunger with a wooden handle and black suction cup (Fierce 2019b, 10-12). The triviality of the material object is crucial. Fierce intensifies symbolic gravity by choosing an object whose literal status resists idealisation. The theatrical force arises precisely through that tension between banality and election.

Q declares that the staff discovered her, that with it one can 'forget or bind everything together', and that one must study its asperities and irregularities in order to understand its full amplitude (Fierce 2019b, 21-24). These lines are central to the entire trilogy. The staff is now no longer merely looked at; it elects, links, and demands a finer mode of attention. It also becomes singularised against equivalence. Q insists that this is not just any staff. It is this one. Such insistence resembles the structure of sacred attention: the object becomes a site of heightened relational truth.

The ladder episode is the turning point. Q climbs, looks at the staff from above, and concludes that from that vantage it resembles all the others. The privileged object is relativised by a change of scale (Fierce 2019b, 27-29). This is a profound dramaturgical move. Fierce introduces perspective as a force of disenchantment. Height does not reveal hidden glamour; it reveals resemblance. Yet the consequence is not nihilism. It is authorship. Having understood this, Q resolves to create her own staff. This may be the trilogy's boldest strategic claim. The answer to disappointment is not withdrawal. It is production.

The staff also becomes entangled with desire, memory, and disappearance. Q speaks of preference, touch, and singular attachment; later she repeats that it has disappeared (Fierce 2019b, 77-80). The symbolic object is therefore subjected to loss. It cannot remain an untouched idol. Its disappearance forces a change in regime: from possession to making, from captivation to agency. This movement recalls the Qur'anic staff at a structural level. In the Qur'an, the staff is never adored as an autonomous fetish; it is activated in relation to a task. Fierce's second play approaches the same threshold by pushing desire until it can no longer remain merely contemplative.

One further passage is especially revealing. After deciding to create her own staff, Q criticises those who speak about such things without ever having taken the time even to think a staff through; yet she also recognises that external obstruction alone does not explain the delay, since she herself listened too long to those voices (Fierce 2019b, 29-32). This is already a move toward strategic ethics. *BATTONS*

II refuses a purely victimising account. The staff here becomes the measure of seriousness, labour, sacrifice, and self-command.

7. BATTONS III: From Symbolic Object to Doctrine of Relation

BATTONS III opens with an absence: the plunger base remains, while the staff itself is gone (Fierce 2019c, 10-12). This absence is not simple loss. Q states that the staff disappeared because she accepted it, accepted the mission, and came to understand the difference. She links that acceptance to distribution, the law of the market, and the need to create words of the heart - words that speak, give, and open (Fierce 2019c, 12-19). The symbolic economy has changed. The staff is now interiorised as mission and exteriorised as circulation.

The major theoretical formulation appears in Scene 3. Q explains that she became strategic for art, that she uses the staff in the sense of linkage rather than separationism, and that from a staff one can make unionism or separationism, bridges or walls (Fierce 2019c, 24-27). This passage is the doctrinal centre of the trilogy. The object has completed its transformation from enigmatic centre to strategic principle. Its value no longer depends on singular aura alone. It depends on use, orientation, and world-making effect.

This is where the Qur'anic comparison becomes especially fertile. The staff of Musa parts the sea. It is therefore an instrument that creates passage through apparent impossibility. It also exposes the falsity of rival spectacles and brings water from the rock. In each case, the staff mediates a difference between closure and opening, illusion and proof, scarcity and provision. Fierce's bridge-or-wall proposition belongs to the same family of thought. The staff is not innocent. It is an operator whose ethical meaning is determined by the relation it installs. Does it connect? Does it isolate? Does it permit collective movement? Does it organise enclosure?

The inclusion of market language in BATTONS III adds one further layer of importance. Fierce does not abandon symbolic or spiritual density when she invokes distribution, capital, and circulation. She folds them into the same system. The staff becomes usable within artistic strategy, cultural transmission, and social architecture. That synthesis is one reason the trilogy deserves attention beyond theatre studies alone. It stages the passage from sign to infrastructure.

8. Strategic Significance for Contemporary Publishing and Critical Reception

For the publishing industry, the strongest value of BATTONS lies in its ability to sustain multiple interpretive scales without dissolving into vagueness. The trilogy can be read as erotic theatre, symbolic theatre, philosophical theatre, or spiritually inflected theatre. Yet these are not competing labels. They are layers built around one disciplined object system. This makes the work highly legible for editors, critics, curators, and scholars seeking texts that support both immediate affective response and long-form critical discourse.

The comparison with the Qur'anic staff further enlarges BATTONS' field of reception. It places the trilogy within a transhistorical conversation about delegated power, passage, proof, mortality, and the ethics of use. Importantly, such a comparison does not narrow the work into a confessional reading. It demonstrates instead that Fierce has produced a symbolic architecture capable of entering dialogue with one of the most powerful scriptural object traditions in world literature.

Strategically, one may therefore define BATTONS as a theatre of discernment. Its core question is never simply, 'What is this object?' The deeper question is, 'What becomes possible through this object, and what type of relation does it institute?' That question is of immediate contemporary relevance. In a cultural environment saturated with image and declaration, Fierce returns criticism to the level of

infrastructure: what opens, what closes, what links, what isolates, what sustains, and what finally collapses.

9. Conclusion

The staff in Fierce's *BATTONS* trilogy and the staff in the Qur'an share a structural destiny. In both corpora, the object begins close to utility and ends close to judgement. It supports the body, exceeds the body, exposes the reader, tests the world, and reveals the ethical meaning of direction. In the Qur'an, the staff is a sign entrusted to prophetic mission. In *BATTONS*, it becomes a dramatic instrument through which interpretation, desire, authorship, and strategy are progressively purified.

The trilogy's decisive contribution lies in its last step. Fierce does not leave the staff in the register of mystery, nor even in the register of passion. She moves it into doctrine. From a staff one may build a bridge or a wall. This is a statement about art, politics, language, intimacy, and civilisation all at once. It is also the most exact bridge back to the Qur'anic archive, where the staff opens the sea, brings forth water, defeats false spectacle, and reveals that unsupported sovereignty will fall. In that sense, *BATTONS* is not a trilogy about an object. It is a trilogy about the ethics of orientation.

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